



Woodburn Independent: Big changes planned as MacLaren expansion gets underway

By Tyler Francke, Woodburn Independent
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By the beginning of the summer of 2017, MacLaren Youth Correctional Facility in Woodburn will be expected to house twice as many youth offenders as it has the budgeted capacity to do today.

The change is part of a 10 year, \$49 million facilities plan proposed by Oregon Youth Authority and approved by the Legislature. One of the central components of the plan involves closing Hillcrest Youth Correctional Facility in Salem and relocating its youth, staff and operations to MacLaren.

The preparations needed for the massive undertaking are already underway, including a significant capital investment in MacLaren. The 90-year-old property has the physical capacity to handle a much larger population than it does currently (at its peak in 2001, MacLaren housed 400 youth offenders), but many of its facilities are old, have long lists of deferred maintenance needs and, for the most part, simply don't fit the newer and more positive philosophy of the OYA.

To that end, OYA has designed and will soon break ground on six new housing units that will be situated around a central mall on the east end of the MacLaren campus.

MacLaren Superintendent Dan Berger said those buildings, which will have a maximum capacity of 16 youth offenders each, will hold the intake units for the expanded facility. They will also house the higher-needs cases, youths who have mental, developmental or behavioral issues.

Berger said the high-security units at MacLaren are currently found in the Geer complex, located at the rear of the campus.

A relic of the 1950s, the complex and its housing units may be the poster child for the look and feel that OYA is striving to move away from with this redesign and expansion.



This rendering by the Portland-based architectural firm DLR Group shows the basic exterior design for the six new 16-bed housing units planned for the east campus residential area at MacLaren. Photo courtesy of Oregon Youth Authority, DLR Group.

“It was built in 1959, before MacLaren had a fence. The compound was built for that kind of security,” Berger said. “But the program needs and the security needs are certainly different now. It’s just not conducive to the environment that we want for our kids there.”

OYA Facilities Manager Rex Emery had even stronger words.

“They’re horrible. You have to see them with your own eyes,” he said. “The shower room looks like something that’s right out of a 1950s high school. It’s just completely different than what these new cottages will look like.”

The plan calls for the residential part of the Geer complex to be demolished following the construction of the new units on the east side. The eight cottages located at the front end of MacLaren (closest to Highway 99E) are also slated for varying degrees of facelifts. Those units can hold up to 25 youths at a time.

Berger and Emery said that moving away from the more institutional and correctional atmosphere of the past is an essential component to what OYA calls its “positive human development.” It places an emphasis on design that feels residential and normative, without compromising safety and security for youth, staff and the general public.

“The reality is that these youth are going to be our neighbors,” Berger said. “When they reintegrate back into our communities, we want them to be well prepared to be productive citizens. But everything is balanced with the need for public safety.”

OYA says that research supports the idea that a focus on reformation, treatment, education and skill development decreases the likelihood that a youth will re-offend after being released.

“When you put youth in an institutional setting, they become institutionalized,” Emery said. “The idea is that if they don’t know how to live in a normative environment, they’re not going to be successful out in their communities.”

The new units will also incorporate a lot of natural light and views of the natural setting that characterizes much of the MacLaren campus, with each one featuring an enclosed outdoor recreational yard.

“A lot of this data has been known in public schools for a long time: Youths learn better in classrooms with natural light,” Emery said. “So that’s one of the things we’re focusing on. These facilities will have a lot more natural light.”

The additions will also feature individual rooms, rather than the open, dormitory-style living spaces of the existing cottages. Emery said the purpose of that is to give the units a more normative, comfortable feel, but it will also enhance security. In addition, each individual room will be equipped with a camera.

“It’s still going to be highly secure,” Emery said. “It will just look a little more like a bedroom than the hardened rooms we have in the Geer complex.”

While the construction, remodeling and renovations proceed on one front, OYA has hired a consolidation manager to oversee the process of transitioning the Hillcrest population northward.



This rendering offers a look at the planned interior of the new buildings, which will place an emphasis on versatility, as well as natural light and views of the surrounding scenery. Photo courtesy of Oregon Youth Authority, DLR Group.

“It’s extremely complex,” Berger said. “It’s not just moving the youth out here, we have to redevelop how we engage in campus operations. It’s not just going to be the MacLaren way or the Hillcrest way. We have to work together as a team to decide how we’ll do business in the future.”

The state-approved plan directs that the two facilities consolidate by the end of June 2017. However, the exact timeline for how that will proceed from now until then is still a work in progress, Berger said, and will have to be developed in conjunction with the various construction projects.

MacLaren is currently budgeted to house 136 youth offenders, the same as Hillcrest. When the consolidation is complete, MacLaren’s capacity will be set at 272, Berger said.

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